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France's "Alt-Left"

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Some argue that right wing populist and nativist cabinet members own the U.S. Executive Branch, since President Donald Trump's cabinet picks have reconsidered the merits of economically protectionist policies coupled with controversial anti-immigrant measures. It may be an overstatement to call the Executive cabinet "Alt-Right" with a strict definition of the term's use. However, if the rebranding of traditional party politics is considered to be the creation of an "alternative" right or left, this term can be interesting if recontextualized in France.

France's "Alt-Left," particularly La France Insoumise ("Unsubmissive France"), poses a unique countermovement to the nationalist politics of the Front National. Its success as a political movement should not be downplayed by the victory of Emmanuel Macron and his centrist allies.

On December 1st, 2016, former French president Francois Hollande declared that he would not seek re-election in 2017. His place as candidate for the Socialist Party was filled by Benoit Hamon, an uncharismatic left-wing politician who eventually received only 6.4 percent of France's vote in the first round of the presidential election. Hamon had been Junior Minister of the Social Economy and Minister of National Education under Hollande. When Hollande allegedly failed to fulfill his party's left-wing agenda, Hamon decided to resign as Minister of National Education in 2014. His socialist and environmentalist platform policies drew French voters to vote for him over the more centrist prime minister Emmanuel Valls in the

Jean Luc Melenchon, former leader of the Front De Gauche (“Leftist front”) party, was the most acclaimed left-wing candidate in France during the 2017 election. His new party’s platform fit in with the tide of youthful left-wing movements across Europe.

Gains in representation by Podemos in Spain, the Pirate Party in Iceland, and SYRIZA in Greece all prove that new European left-wing parties are potent and capable of creating impactful legislation that effectively appeals to constituents. Various media outlets have argued otherwise. For example, a Politico article on the failure of former Socialist Party president Francois Hollande supposedly gives evidence for the inability of European socialists to capitalize on stagnant economic growth. This may be true of stagnant socialist parties bogged down by bureaucracy. However, the contemporary “Alt-Left” goes almost completely unnoticed by mainstream American news outlets. The fresh face of the Alt-Left provides a newfound focus on a 100-percent green energy plan by 2050, universal taxation to prevent offshore tax havens, and maintaining anti-austerity measures in the face of a global trend towards privatization.

Candidate Jean Luc Melenchon, a socialist politician who left the Socialist Party in 2008 to form the Front de Gauche — a non-communist party more left than the Socialists — received 19.6 percent of the vote in the first round, which put him in fourth place. Although one can assume his candidacy was less meaningful in comparison to that of Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen’s campaigns, arriving in fourth place was a great feat for Melenchon and France’s far left. The election proved highly contentious. There was a 77-percent voter turnout, with four top candidates receiving about 20 percent of the vote each, and with “wasted votes” on minor candidates being a possible deciding factor in the election. Francois Fillon, former Prime Minister under UMP (“Union for a Popular Movement”) president Nicolas Sarkozy and mainstream conservative candidate for 2017, received 20 percent of the first-round vote. If Nicolas Dupont-Aignan, leader of the minor Gaullist Debout La France party — right leaning, particularly socially conservative — were to hypothetically back out of the race to “give” his votes to the French Republican party, his 4.7 percent could have made Fillon the leading candidate after the first round. Similarly, if “fringe” candidates like Nathalie Arthaud (Worker’s Struggle Party), Jaques Cheminade (Solidarity and Progress Party), Philippe Poutou (New Anti-Capitalist Party), Beniot Hamon (Socialist Party), were to hypothetically “give” their votes to Melenchon, he would be recognized as the “winner” of the first round of elections. The high voter turnout — 80 percent in the first round, 75 percent in the second — and close vote counts both prove that those on the left are engaged: it was not only Emmanuel Macron and centrists who were “holding the line” against far-right candidate Marine Le Pen.

French voters who craved the “fringe left” seemed to parallel voters in Great Britain and the United States, where Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders gained wide ranging popularity in 2015 and 2016 respectively. A

nostalgia-inspired desire for left-wing politicians on the fringes of their own parties reemerged for candidates like these in the French election of 2017. Whether they were students struggling to pay loans in universities or grandparents who lived through '68, the capstone year of 20th century left-wing activism in France, some French citizens found an easy enemy to blame for the 9.5 percent unemployment rate and rent rises: capitalism. This renewed anger draws upon some of the same voter base who opted to cast their ballots to National Front leaders. Working class French citizens need not be portrayed as National Front voters — the left is still an alternative. The political possibility of left-wing protectionist policies, ambitious green energy programs, challenges to intellectual property rights, and renegotiation of European Union treaties have all been laughed off or left undiscussed by the mainstream media. By this token, the only opponent to the Alt-Right in Europe is then thought to be the center: Emmanuel Macron in the case of France.

The volatility of the French election was underplayed by the international media, as most U.S. and British media outlets did not emphasize the rise of France's Alt-Left. Similarly, when Austrian President Alexander Van Der Bellen claimed victory over far-right populist Norbert Hoffer, Anglophone media outlets did not report on his qualifications as a Green candidate as much as they reported on his status as a son of two immigrants. To British and American newspapers, Van Der Bellen was not the second Green president to ever become elected in the world, he was only a defensive pawn blocking the onslaught of vehement anti-immigrant sentiment. While admitting to the media that he subscribed to a kind of centrism in the tradition of liberal John Stuart Mill, Van der Bellen's identification as a "Green" represents a victory for the left in any case.

It is increasingly important that media narratives do not leave the successes of the far-left in Europe unexplained. To make a fully informed projection, English news outlets should offer more coverage of left-wing political parties when describing contentions in the political scene of Europe. Also, the American left must stop and reconsider its demands. Should Democrats still vote Democrat? Should they really be scrambling to reluctantly support a centrist like Hillary Clinton to try to entice Republicans? Or should candidates like Bernie Sanders and Jill Stein be taken more seriously by the American public? If left-wing Americans still want to dream of a society with an equitable distribution of wealth, a healthy environment, and critical analysis of foreign military interventions, they need to start demanding that the "Alt-Left" be recognized in the media analysis of events in Europe like the 2017 French election.

Global

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